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RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0621
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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI PUBLIC FOCUSED ON ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF
GABALA RADAR STATION

Ref: Baku 730

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION

1. (U) Russian President Putin's proposal on the joint usage of the Gabala radar station has triggered extensive press reports on the long-dormant issue of the station's negative impact on the environment and health. Minister of Health Oktay Shiraliyev has been quoted as saying that the station has "no negative impact whatsoever," but Minister of Ecology Huseyn Bagirov remarked that "long-term observation and research is required." The official newspapers have not picked up the story, but the semi-official Yeni Azerbaijan daily aired some of these concerns and editorialized that U.S. involvement and an upgrade of the old Soviet facility with new environment-friendly western technologies would be a positive development. Independent ANS TV station carried the views of scientific experts who argued that the negative impact could not even be fully assessed due to the fact that there is little information about the station and no public access. Other experts asserted that previous studies conducted by a State Commission 10-15 years ago had revealed that the station has a negative impact on public health, including on people living as far away as Baku. The pro-opposition newspapers have seized on the story as an opportunity to criticize the GOAJ for leasing the station to Russia based solely on its political interests while largely ignoring the health concerns of the Azerbaijani population (ref).

2. (SBU) Comment: At this point, the Embassy is unable to independently verify rumors of the Gabala radar's negative health and environmental effects. However, we note that, due to the persistence and volume with which local officials have raised the radar's alleged negative health and environmental effects, the Peace Corps as a policy has not placed Volunteers in Gabala region. As we consider President Putin's proposal from both a technical and political perspective, we must not forget that any agreement to share the use of this radar facility should also carefully consider its environment and health impact on Azerbaijan. Failure to do so would invite public criticism, while special attention to these issues could earn us significant public goodwill.

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